

Katherine Kim
Spring 2015: Social Media and Culture
Final Paper: Are You Jenn Im?

On July 8, 2010, two young Korean American girls with a hobby took to YouTube and launched what would become the realization of a dream career. Twenty-five-year-old California-native Jenn Im, known for her channel clothesencounters, unknowingly began creating the brand she has and is today with her then-best friend Sarah Chu out of a love for styling and a talent for video editing. Now, five years and more than one million subscribers later, Im has grown from modeling her outfit ideas out by the side of her parents' house to becoming one of the most popular fashion vloggers on YouTube. And what has made her so successful? Im is a seemingly perfectly package of what a confident, modern American girl should look like and a slightly less sure one should be looking up to. She is always smiling and happy, extremely well-put together, without a hair or bit of makeup out of place, and seems to have the perfect life full of travel, friends, great foods, etc.—exactly what American society is telling girls and people of minority races to be. Jenn Im's partnership with YouTube has made her into a “perfect” person, a celebrity and friend, who falls into the trap of what society wants her to be rather than the more relatable, more average-seeming Korean American girl she was at the start of her channel, still is in her roots, and encourages others to stay true to.

Summer Fashion Haul 2010

This very first clothesencounters video features a young Im and her best friend sharing their excitement about the clothes they have just added to their closets, completely unaware of the hundreds of thousands of views and micro-celebrity status to come. Here, they are doing what girls in this day and age are sort of expected to do and involving themselves in a social media trend. The chapter “Friendship” (Boyd, 2008) states that social media has become an essential

Katherine Kim

Spring 2015: Social Media and Culture

Final Paper: Are You Jenn Im?

part of teens' development in terms of their "ability to share ideas, cultural artifacts, and emotions with one another" because "while social warfare and drama do exist, the value of social media rests in their ability to strengthen connections" (p.25). These days, being connected and developing one's social skills in the online world are necessary in order to participate in society. The young Im and her friend identified a desire to be part of the large online community outside of their usual confined space at home and made this video to have their voices be heard. The online world has become a far more welcoming space for girls and women to express themselves—what they like, what they do, who they are—and the girls also seemed to identify with that. According to Banet-Weiser (2011), "New media seem to provide spaces to bring girls' identities 'into being,' or again, to 'live online' ... Online spaces provide a potentially expansive opportunity for girls to explore gender and sexual identities, through girl-oriented websites, home pages and personal profiles, and YouTube videos" (p.282). Because the female part of the population has long been oppressed by society in terms of feeling the freedom to figure out their identities and express themselves, new digital media had begun to serve as the platform for people in this age to do so. These two girls are examples of this freedom being felt, as they chose not to stop at sharing their new "hauls" with just one another, but with everyone and anyone out on the Web who would listen. Banet-Weiser also states that these steps to self-discovery that are happening online are the "same discourses that provide the logic for girls' post-feminist self-branding," which secure young women into the "norms and values of hegemonic gendered consumer culture" and then turns one into the "self-branded" girl who authorizes herself to be consumed through her own self-production" (2011, p. 283). While there is a sense of liberation growing within every young woman who is able to freely express herself and make decisions for

herself, there is also the consequence of having that happen while falling right into what the consumer culture wants women to think and desire. However, at this point in Im's not-yet-career, she is still a young girl, bright-eyed and ready for the small-scale fame and recognition to come. In the study "To See and Be Seen: Celebrity on Twitter" (2011), the micro-celebrity is defined as the way people "amp up" their popularity online by producing and sharing videos, blogs, and their social networking profiles (Boyd, p. 141). The average Im and Chu, still somewhat unknowingly, launched their names and faces out into the wider world, and since then, all of Im's choices have been much more strategic to increase and maintain her celebrity across her social media platforms.

An Intimate Conversation with Jenn Im of Clothes Encounters

Fast-forward a few years to a video interview with ThreadSence, which appears alongside clothesencounters videos on YouTube and in which Im shows a more vulnerable side to her than her viewers are used to seeing—a perfect moment of intimacy for her friends, the fans. People who possess some sort of fame learn over time how to keep their cool and maintain their desired public image. "The Vulnerable Video Blogger" (Lange, 2007) states that many vloggers have adapted this mindset and have come to find that there is great value in showing and sharing intimate moments with the viewers who are watching them, for they are able to gain more insight into who they are and how to interact with who they are talking to (p.2). "The sharing of these intimate moments is not self-indulgent, solipsistic obsession. Rather it provides a means to connect with others ... Video bloggers acknowledge that the video image, rather than text alone, promotes a key connection" (p. 11). This study shows that people who have some sort of a

Katherine Kim

Spring 2015: Social Media and Culture

Final Paper: Are You Jenn Im?

following need to recognize the importance of making connections with their viewers in order to keep them watching and supporting. There is only advantage and necessity in exposing oneself and becoming vulnerable when it is for the sake of the art. Boyd (2011) supports this notion with the fact that for some Twitter accounts with large followings, the popularity was achieved through the digital age's form of "second order intimacy," which includes sharing about personal things, posting exclusive content, and posting real things about their lives on social media (p. 147). This "illusion of intimacy" is similar to the talk-show appearances big name celebrities make and the supposed autobiographies that become public for the entire world to see and know. In all of Im's videos, she talks straight into the camera with a smile and acts as though whoever is watching on the other end is a friend. She takes us on her travel adventures and shows us what is in her closet, which is intimate in and of itself, and has even introduced her boyfriend to us in a separate video titled, "Meet My Boyfriend." However, in this particular video, which was not even hosted on her own channel, Im honestly shares her struggles as a vlogger and begins to cry at the thought of disappointing her followers. While this video would have been slightly more convenient for subscribers to see had it been on clothesencounters, perhaps the fact that this most intimate moment Im shares with us is on a different channel leads some of us to believe that she does not want us to think she has cried for us and posted it on purpose. While we the viewers would never confidently know the reason for this choice, nonetheless, Im has inevitably touched the hearts of some, as fans take these additional chances to feel close to their favorite celebrities, according to the study "Making Monsters" (Click, et al., 2013, p. 366). "Although online relationships and conversations between celebrities and fans remain mediated, fans increasingly experience them as real and authentic, reinforcing their feelings of truly 'knowing' celebrities"

Katherine Kim
Spring 2015: Social Media and Culture
Final Paper: Are You Jenn Im?

(Click, et al., 2013, p. 366). Im has undoubtedly successfully managed to maintain her status with those of us who have considered her our friend after watching her videos and following her social media accounts. Moments such as this video only reinforce those same fans/friends' feelings of being close with the vlogger.

Jenn Goes To Korea

Because Im has become a vlogger who has the opportunities to travel for photoshoots and events, it was only natural and expected that she would visit the land of her ancestors at some point, yet the resulting video documenting the trip features a highly disconnected American. One of the most glaring facts about Im upon first glance is the fact that she is Asian American, yet based on this video and all the others in her repertoire, there is little to nothing else that makes any mention of the fact that her family was not originally from the land on which she lives. While there is no rule anywhere stating that people of minority races need to proclaim their heritage from rooftops and maintain the traditions of their motherlands wherever they are, it is inevitably noticeable when people completely assimilate into the "new" land and never show any sign of having any connection to the old apart from the way the face looks. Im rarely makes mention of her Korean roots, and if not for her skin tone, she might have gotten away with avoiding doing so altogether. From the accent with which she talks to the style of makeup art she puts on her face every day, Im is, for lack of a better description, a white girl. Banet-Weiser (2011) states, "Individuals who are culturally marginalized (through law, policy, media representation, etc.) because of a class, for instance, do not have the same access to the practice of self-branding as white, middle-class girls and women" (p. 288). According to this study, people of minority races

Katherine Kim
Spring 2015: Social Media and Culture
Final Paper: Are You Jenn Im?

do not have the same opportunities to and chances of becoming popular and being recognized by a wide audience, for they are not white. Going along with this notion, perhaps a more in-touch-with-her-roots Im would not have been as successful as this, for lack of a better term, “white-washed” one. If she had worn more Korean-inspired clothing, done her makeup as they do overseas, or spoken English with a Korean accent, perhaps she would not have garnered as much attention as she has. Magnet’s study “Feminist Sexualities, Race, and the Internet” (2007) mentions Ann duCille’s article on creating “ethnic” Barbies, which comes to conclusion that dyeing the traditional blonde, blue-eyed doll’s hair and changing her clothes is nothing but a “quick fix” that only “[reinforces] the norm rather than effecting substantive change” (p. 595). According to the article, white is the standard for changes that would be made for not-so-new dolls and for any people of minority races that live in the American “white-washed” culture. However, on the other side of the argument, perhaps she has gained the clicks and fans that she has from the way that she looks at first glance, in the stills of the video links. According to the study “Posting Racism and Sexism” (Dubrofsky, 2014), “Women of color are shown as complicit in their own objectification, but unlike the white women who are presented as working hard to attract this gaze ... women of color are shown always already-there-to-be-gazed-at ... since they attract it naturally, unwittingly, without effort” (p. 283). While white women supposedly need to exercise and make the effort to be attractive to look at, women of other races have an “exotic” quality that allows for them to be intriguing to the sight without necessarily having to make any effort for that attention. Because Im is undeniably very “Asian-looking,” she has sort of built herself up with the best of both worlds—being ready to receive gaze and being able to maintain that attention with the “whiteness” or “Americanness” of the way she talks,

Katherine Kim
Spring 2015: Social Media and Culture
Final Paper: Are You Jenn Im?

dresses, lives, and makes herself up to look. Ultimately, though, all sides of the argument point to the fact that white, at least in America, is the norm, or the standard.

Jenn Goes To Coachella 2015

As seen in this video as well as all the others, Im has come to adapt the lifestyle that all the American celebrities show young girls is the fun, cool, attractive way to live. Here, she is being sponsored by Birchbox to attend to Coachella, the pricey three-day music festival that all the celebrities attend. A cool, modern American girl puts herself together well, has a lot of equally attractive friends, goes out to eat expensive food, and has a blast attending concerts and festivals. By these standards, Im is doing the American girl thing perfectly. However, this status comes with the price of falling right into the gendered consumer culture trap mentioned earlier.

According to Banet-Weiser (2011), creating and developing a self-brand on social networking sites like YouTube means “girls reference brands not simply as commodities but as the context for everyday living” and that the self-brands “are repeatedly circulated in ways that support normative gender relations rather than challenge them” (p. 285). Despite her well wishes and positive messages of encouragement to her followers, Im herself has fallen into not only denying her minority heritage in America, but also doing the very things that girls are expected to do by the people controlling consumer culture. She attends the festivals, goes on the cruises, and most significantly, has begun to shop for clothes and accessories at the brand-name stores she humbly began her career without. Similarly, Senft’s study on Camgirls (2008) puts it on another level: “For feminists, network society presents a double-edged sword. ... It permits women around the world to use technologies ... to escape their cities and countries of origin, work remotely, and

Katherine Kim
Spring 2015: Social Media and Culture
Final Paper: Are You Jenn Im?

distribute media over the Internet ... [but] for those who do work, networks create ‘intense exploitation of [female] labor’” (p. 6). There are pros of having more opportunities for women to work through networks in this age, but there are many cons that cannot be ignored. While that is on another level of consideration for what is going on here in a big-picture way, Im and her peers in the same business part of a larger issue that most minimally put is like that of their falling to consumer culture in the midst of having a career.

Spring Outfits 2015

Finally, in comparison with the very first video uploaded on clothesencounters, this video, one of the most recent directly fashion-involved episodes, shows a much more polished Im, so much that she is nearly unrecognizable. Her cinematography and editing have changed in technological quality, so the overall product is much smoother in transition and more professional-looking. Her hair has been cut and styled in a way more reflective of her age, and her makeup style is no longer a raccoon-eyeliner look reminiscent of high school days but the full nine yards—foundation, smoky-eye, and all. The biggest and most notable difference, though, is her drastic change in clothing style, the supposed reason her followers check in with her in the first place. Im has upgraded dramatically from doing the Forever 21, H&M, thrift store combination to wearing pieces predominantly from lesser known yet still expensive designers and companies. Considering these changes Im has made, Bloor’s chapter “What Are Friends For?” (2010) makes a relevant point: “Being an authentic person in your responses to the world, rather than allowing yourself to be drawn into the limited range of practices shared by everyone else, is hard work. It takes discipline and the ability to reflect on the value of the practices we engage in instead of

Katherine Kim

Spring 2015: Social Media and Culture

Final Paper: Are You Jenn Im?

merely allowing ourselves to fall into the habit of doing what everyone else does” (p. 157). The drastic changes Im has gone through in her style and appearance are yet another confirmation that she has conformed in many ways to what American consumer culture desired for her. Ironically, Im’s biggest encouragements to her followers are usually related to being true to yourself and wearing what you want, without having concern for what others might think about that. Banet-Weiser (2011) similarly states that “girls’ self-presentation online is a contradictory practice, one that does not demonstrate an unfettered freedom in crafting identity any more than it is completely controlled and determined by the media and cultural industries” (p. 280). Due to her falling into doing exactly what she has told her followers not to do, Im’s upgrading to using more products and styling with more upscale pieces for her outfits widens the gap between her micro-celebrity and her followers. The contradictions in message being portrayed and the ones being spoken in Im’s videos are similar to what often results in criticism against YouTube’s Jenna Marbles, or Jenny Mourey. As McMillan and Wotanis state in their study of gender performance on YouTube (2014), when Mourey creates parodies of certain behaviors stereotypical of certain people, especially women, she does so while objectifying herself by the amount of makeup and type of clothing she is wearing (p. 10). Both of these female vloggers do, in their own ways, raise questions of who they really are and what they are trying to represent, as the contradictions and changes do not always add up. Their individual successes with online presence and resulting partnership with YouTube have influenced them to become the polished versions of themselves that society has always expected them to be.

Katherine Kim
Spring 2015: Social Media and Culture
Final Paper: Are You Jenn Im?

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